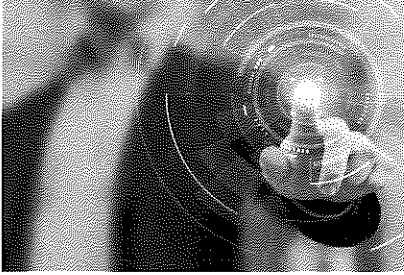


Mystery Revealed

LESSON 6



Topic

The gospel

Theme

The gospel is for people from all cultures.

Desired Response

The learner will seek to spread the gospel without prejudice.

Materials

- Visuals 15–17.

Scripture Focus

Ephesians 3:1–13

Summary

This lesson presents the truth that believers—Jews and Gentiles alike—are members of the church, the Body of Christ, and equally share the unsearchable riches of Christ.

Outline

I. Preface to the Mystery (Eph. 3:1–4)

- A. Reception of the mystery (3:1–3)
- B. Revelation of the mystery (3:3, 4)
- C. Review of the definition of a mystery (3:5)

II. Content of the Mystery (Eph. 3:6)

- A. Gentiles are fellow heirs
- B. Gentiles are fellow members
- C. Gentiles are fellow partakers

III. Minister of the Mystery (Eph. 3:7–9)

- A. Paul's attitude (3:7, 8)
- B. Paul's actions (3:8, 9)

IV. Reasons for the Mystery (Eph. 3:10–13)

- A. Provide a lesson (3:10, 11)
- B. Promote boldness (3:12, 13)

Memory Verses

"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 3:8, 9).

GETTING STARTED

Everyone Loves a Mystery

Sales for mystery novels tops 725 million dollars annually in the United States. That's a lot of money to find out "who done it"!

ASK: What is your favorite mystery series? Why is it your favorite? (Q1)

ASK: How do you respond when you have solved a mystery? (Q2)

The Bible holds one of the greatest mysteries of all time. Paul addressed the mystery's revelation, content, and purposes. His address should encourage us to spread the gospel anywhere God leads us.

Different Perspectives

OBJECT LESSON: Set up two boxes that are the same height. Put objects on top of the boxes and objects on the table between the boxes. Have a learner look at the boxes from the front, making sure to squat down so the top of the boxes are at eye level. Have another learner look at the boxes from the side. Give both learners an opportunity to describe what they see.

ASK: Whose description is correct? *Both are correct. One is simply more limited than the other.*

This illustration has a Biblical connection. Some truth revealed in the New Testament was hidden to those in the Old Testament. They had a different perspective on God's grand plan for His Chosen People and for us today. Paul addresses the hidden truth, called a mystery, and challenges us to respond to the revealed mystery.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. Preface to the Mystery (Eph. 3:1-4)

A. Reception of the mystery (3:1-3)

As Paul continued his letter, he seemed to be ready to offer another prayer. His words, "For this cause I Paul" in verse 1 parallel what he wrote in verse 14 just before he prayed. Perhaps calling himself "the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles" momentarily diverted his thoughts from praying to teaching. Either way, he drew his readers' attention to his role as an apostle for the Gentiles in disclosing information about the church. His words "for this cause" (3:1) draw us back to the teaching that by grace God included Gentiles in the church, His dwelling place (2:22).

Paul assumed the Ephesians had heard of the "dispensation of the grace of God" which was given to him to reveal to them (3:2). Paul acted as God's steward of the mystery of the doctrine of grace. God trusted him to proclaim His revelation. Directing Paul to record the revelation obviously helped Paul in his stewardship.

B. Revelation of the mystery (3:3, 4)

Paul again digressed by mentioning that he had previously written to the Ephesians about the mystery of Christ in a “few words” (3:3). “Few words” refer to Ephesians 2:11–22, where Paul described the relationship between Gentile and Jewish believers. In Ephesians 3:4 he added that reading his letter would help them understand his insight into the mystery of Christ.

C. Review of the definition of a mystery (3:5)

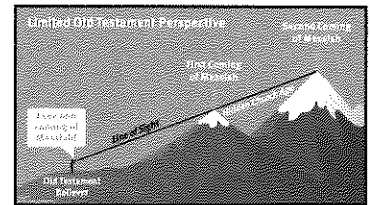
When we think of a mystery, we usually think of spies, intrigue, unsolved riddles, and searches for clues. A Biblical mystery, however, is not a who-did-it story. Paul helps us understand Biblical mysteries by naming their three components (3:5).

First, a Biblical mystery was truth not revealed during the period of the Old Testament. Paul called the Old Testament times “other ages” (3:5). You won’t find detailed descriptions of God’s plans for the church in the Old Testament. The Jews in the Old Testament assumed the Messiah would come once and set up His Kingdom. Even Jesus’ disciples near the end of His ministry still anticipated Jesus establishing His reign on earth.

DISPLAY: Visual 15—Limited Old Testament Perspective. Explain that in the Old Testament prophets saw the Messiah’s coming as a singular event. It was like they were looking at two mountain tops that seemed to be one. What they couldn’t see was the valley in between. The church, represented by the valley, was a mystery to the Old Testament prophets.

Second, a Biblical mystery can be known only by revelation. Paul wrote, “It is now revealed” (3:5). He had learned the meaning of this mystery by direct divine revelation. God took Paul to the “valley” between the two “peaks” of Christ’s returns and showed him around.

Third, a Biblical mystery is revealed in the New Testament. Paul wrote that the mystery was revealed in his time—“now”—to the apostles and prophets. God revealed this mystery of Christ by the Spirit not only to Paul but also to other apostles and New Testament prophets (3:5).



ASK: What part of the Bible tells us how to organize and conduct church ministry? (Q3) *The Epistles.*

ASK: What benefits does the Old Testament provide for the church? (Q4) *The Old Testament reveals God’s character, provides examples of living by faith, details God’s plan for Israel, records history, and supplies details concerning the end times.*

II. Content of the Mystery (Eph. 3:6)

During the New Testament period, God revealed to Paul and to others that the church would include Jews and Gentiles united in Christ.

ASK: On a practical level, what are a few implications of equality in Christ regardless of cultural backgrounds? (Q5) *No culture is excluded from the gospel; the gospel should be taken to people of all cultures; different cultures can work together to spread the gospel.*

ASK: Do you agree that unbelievers see Christians setting a good example of harmony with those of different cultures? Explain. (Q6)

A. Gentiles are fellow heirs

Paul continued, disclosing the content of the mystery of Christ: “That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (3:6). Gentiles responded to the good news by trusting in Christ. As a result, they became fellow heirs with Jewish believers.

ASK: What does it mean to be a fellow heir? (Q7) *Fellow heirs share the same family privileges and the same inheritance.*

As fellow heirs, the Jews and Gentiles shared all the privileges that befall those who are members of Christ’s Body, the church. Gentiles shared the same “legal” status as believing Jews. They received the same blessings that believing Jews received. This truth doesn’t mean Gentile believers may claim the promises God gave to Israel. God never intended to give those promises to the church. And, as mentioned already in this course, God still plans to fulfill all those promises to Israel in the future.

B. Gentiles are fellow members

Being fellow members indicates that believing Jews and believing Gentiles are equal members of the Body of Christ. This truth had a deep impact on the early church. For example, pastors and deacons didn’t need to be Jewish to be legitimate. Instead God laid out qualifications for the church offices that focused on character and heart issues (1 Tim. 3). Skin color and cultural background weren’t issues.

ASK: How else would being fellow members impact Jewish and Gentile believers in the same church? (Q8) *No person’s vote was worth more than anyone else’s vote; no person deserved more care and attention than anyone else.*

C. Gentiles are fellow partakers

Jewish and Gentile believers are also fellow partakers of the promise. The word “promise” most likely refers to all spiritual blessings that the church possesses. Again, the promises made to Israel as God’s Chosen People are not what Paul was referring to. The promise of the Holy Spirit is one promise given to the church. The Jewish believers could not claim any special enabling that wasn’t also available to the Gentile believers.

The content of the mystery of Ephesians 3:6, then, is threefold: (1) Gentile believers are joint heirs of an inheritance to which they have no claim by birth. (2) Gentile believers and Jewish believers are joint members of the Body of Christ. (3) Gentiles and Jews are saved through the gospel.

The fact that saved Gentiles and saved Jews share spiritual equality in Christ should lead us to value one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Like brothers and sisters in a biological family, we should help one another.

III. Minister of the Mystery (Eph. 3:7–9)

In verses 7–9 Paul identified himself as the minister of the mystery, listing his character, qualifications, and task.

A. Paul's attitude (3:7, 8)

Paul didn't have a big ego because God had revealed the mystery of Christ to him. He regarded himself as a "minister," a servant of the Lord. Paul credited God with making him a minister "according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power" (3:7). His appointed ministry was a gift from God; he had done nothing to earn it. God showered His grace on Paul and performed a mighty work in the apostle's life. God transformed the onetime persecutor of the church into a minister of the gospel.

Paul insisted he had no innate qualifications for the ministry. He wrote, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given" (3:8). The words "unto me" are emphatic in the Greek. We can almost feel Paul's amazement that God had chosen him to be a minister. He was amazed that God could ever use a sinner like him.

ASK: What can we learn from Paul's response to being chosen by God to be the minister of the mystery? (Q9) *Paul's response showed that the opportunity to serve God is a result of God's grace and that serving God effectively can be done only through God's grace. We should serve with similar humility and dependence on God.*

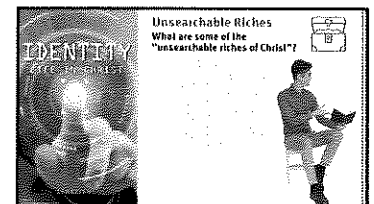
ASK: How does humility help when reaching people cross-culturally? (Q10) *Pride is the root of prejudice. Humility will keep a person focused on others' spiritual needs.*

B. Paul's actions (3:8, 9)

Paul's task was to "preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (3:8), meaning he proclaimed to the Gentiles the good news of the immeasurable, unfathomable, untraceable wealth that was theirs in Christ.

DISPLAY: Visual 16—Unsearchable Riches. **ASK:** What are some of the "unsearchable riches of Christ"? (Q11) *Forgiveness; redemption; eternal life; promise of glorification; sanctification; peace; joy; fellowship with God.*

The apostle also helped the Gentiles see that they had the same spiritual standing as the Jews (3:9). God formulated this truth before creation even though He didn't reveal it to Paul until the first century. The salvation of Jews and Gentiles and their equal standing in the Body of Christ has always been in God's mind—and on His heart. The church is not an afterthought. It has always been part of God's plan for the ages.



IV. Reasons for the Mystery (Eph. 3:10–13)

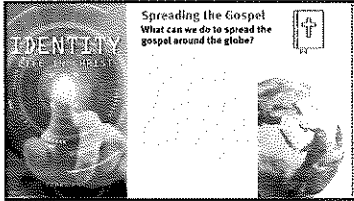
A. Provide a lesson (3:10, 11)

Paul concluded his teachings on the mystery of Christ by identifying the purpose of the mystery: "To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in

heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (3:10). Principalities and powers are angelic beings, whether fallen or unfallen; but only the good angels are referred to in verse 10. God is using the church as an object lesson to teach the holy angels about His manifold wisdom. Again, the mystery was not an afterthought; it was the eternal plan God conceived and fulfilled in His Son (3:11).

B. Promote boldness (3:12, 13)

The enormous truth about the church not only thrilled Paul but also strengthened his resolve to boldly proclaim the gospel (3:12). Paul willingly endured all kinds of tribulations, including being left for dead, so he could share the mystery of Christ with people groups from widely different cultures and backgrounds.



DISPLAY: Visual 17—Spreading the Gospel. **ASK:** What can we do to spread the gospel around the globe? (Q12) *Give financially to missions; offer ourselves to missions opportunities; learn about the cultures represented in our neighborhoods; encourage our children toward missions; pray for cross-cultural missions works.*

The hardships Paul experienced as he spread the good news of Christ failed to deter him. He was concerned the Ephesian believers would become discouraged by reports of his trials, but he explained that the trials were for their glory (3:13).

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Use the following activities to help the learners appreciate the mystery Paul disclosed and to understand their need to do their part in spreading the gospel to people of all cultural backgrounds.

Testimonies

ASK: Share a joyful experience that came from meeting and interacting with a believer of a different cultural background. (Q13)

ASK: Based on those joyful experiences, what you recommend to other believers? (Q14)

Cross-cultural Evangelism

Encourage the learners to review the unsearchable riches of Christ that they appreciate the most. Have them select a neighbor or two who they think would enjoy the same unsearchable riches. (Q15)

ASK: What will you do to communicate those riches to that neighbor? (Q16)

Memory Verses

Encourage your learners to memorize Ephesians 3:8 and 9. Give them an opportunity to say the verses in class next week.